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SUBJECT: GEORGIAN DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER ON CIS WITHDRAWAL,
NATO ENTRY

REF: TEFFT-REMLER E-MAIL 5/19/06

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Georgian Deputy PM Baramidze told the Ambassador May 23 that he expected Georgia to leave the CIS in a matter of months. Negotiating bilateral agreements with the non-Russian members of the organization would be a priority; it would be important to protect the interests of Georgian citizens living and trading in the CIS. He predicted that as Georgia moved towards NATO membership, Russia would increasingly portray it as irresponsible. Ambassador urged Georgia to pursue tactics that would make such a portrayal difficult. End Summary.

CIS

¶2. (C) Georgian Deputy PM and State Minister for European Integration Giorgi (Gia) Baramidze called on the Ambassador May 23. He was in Moscow en route to a CIS Heads of Government (HOG) meeting in Dushanbe. He said his instructions were to inform other CIS HOGs that Georgia wished to maintain excellent bilateral relations. However, in view of the CIS' failure to secure for Georgia the freedom of travel and economic access that it secured for other member countries, President Saakashvili had asked the government to "start consideration" of whether Georgia should remain a member of the organization. Baramidze would stress that no decisions had been taken.

¶3. (C) Baramidze said that in his opinion it was a "matter of months" before Georgia quit the organization. The GOG needed first to ensure that the economic interests of its people would be secure (especially by replacing the CIS visa regime with bilateral ones) and that other necessary bilateral agreements could be reached. Timing would be important: before or after the NATO Summit in Riga?

¶4. (C) Ambassador asked what the practical consequences of withdrawal would be. Baramidze listed several:

-- The Abkhazia PKO was a CIS PKO whose status would have to change; Georgia was already considering demanding that it leave. Baramidze did not address the likely Russian reaction.

-- Georgia's main exports to Russia -- fruit, wine and mineral water -- were already banned, and Georgia was the only CIS country whose citizens needed visas to enter Russia. In the long run, Georgia would benefit from finding a replacement for Russian markets, as the Baltics had done. (Note: Baramidze was concerned about the fate of Georgian citizens living and working in Russia, but did not raise the prospect that Russia might allow them to stay but interfere with remittances they send back to relatives in Georgia. End Note.)

-- Georgian Ambassador Chubinishvili, who was sitting in, added that if Georgia quit the CIS, Abkhazia and South Ossetia would demand CIS membership and might be allowed in as "observers." He believed Georgian citizens of non-Georgian ethnicity (Armenians and Azeris) might be expelled from Russia back to Georgia to stir up trouble in ethnically sensitive regions.

¶ 15. (C) Ambassador asked about the attitudes of other CIS members. Baramidze guessed that Kazakh President Nazarbayev, now CIS Chair, would be "slightly on the Russian side" in the dispute. Ukraine would be Georgia's main ally, though it would not leave the CIS. Moldova would be another ally. If Azerbaijan supported Georgia, Armenia would oppose, and vice versa. The attitude of Belarus was a foregone conclusion.

NATO

¶ 16. (C) Baramidze talked of progress in convincing Allies to grant Georgia Intensified Dialogue (ID) for NATO membership. Three days earlier, German Chancellor Merkel's Foreign Affairs advisor had told Baramidze he was convinced, but needed to conduct internal consultations. Baramidze expected a long process for NATO membership, but warned that if Georgia's expectations were allowed to fail, Georgia might develop "different priorities," especially on peaceful conflict resolution.

¶ 17. (C) Baramidze said that the reluctance of some Allies on ID was due to an intensive Russian campaign. He said Russia will engage in military provocations, as it already has with "visas, gas, electricity and embargoes on Georgian products." That was all done to cause internal discontent and

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demonstrations. The GOG's popularity had gone down, but as the result of normal internal processes, not the Russian campaign. Externally, the Russians would try to convince the international community that the Georgia was run by a "bunch of kids" who make provocative statements and take crazy, unpredictable actions. Russia could then turn to the G8 and NATO and say, "Let us handle these crazy people."

¶ 18. (C) Ambassador asked whether recent public statements by Georgian officials did not play into the Russian strategy Baramidze had described. Baramidze said that the statements themselves were just excuses; Russian actions were not driven by them. He reiterated that Russia's main aim was to portray Georgia as irresponsible. Ambassador reiterated that provocative Georgian statements made it easier for Russia to do just that. Baramidze sighed and acknowledged that sometimes DefMin Okruashvili "lets emotion get the better of him."

¶ 19. (C) Ambassador said there was little advice he could give Baramidze about Russia that Baramidze did not already know, or that Ambassador Tefft had not already conveyed. Russia made no secret of its concerns over Georgian moves towards NATO. It had used some levers, and had many more. Politics would get more intense as we headed towards 2008, and Georgia-bashing would be popular. Continued high energy prices would keep the Russians self-confident. The U.S. had a strong interest in cooperating with Russia where possible, but would not hesitate to criticize where necessary. Georgia should work with the Europeans as well, and despite all temptations not fall into the trap of making it easier for Russia to portray Georgia as irresponsible.

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